In the End, God
Matthew 27:57 - 28:8
April 11, 1971 Easter Sunday
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G. K. Chesterton once said: "A real Christian who believes should do two things: dance out of the sheer sense of joy, and fight out of the sheer sense of victory." And yet, on this Easter Sunday, 1971, as we look out on our war-torn world, and strife-ridden and divided nation, the only dancing we see is out of a sense of boredom and loneliness, and the only fighting out of a lack of knowing how to live in peace. To celebrate Easter, today, is to rediscover what we have to dance about, and the rational for continuing the fight.

It is a day for loud proclaimation, not scholarly explanation. In my own ministry I have changed at this point. As is the case with every fresh theological graduate, I used to feel that Easter was ill-spent unless some scholarly exposition of the doctrine of the Resurrection was delivered. I'm not so sure of that any more. I'm not so sure something so incredible as God's dead son getting up from his grave can be explained. Explanations defuse the Resurrection: when it is understandable it is no longer a miracle. And if it is not a miracle, it is, needless to say, no longer a resurrection. On Easter Sunday, of all days, we're not talking about some safe, secure theoretical proposition. We are talking about a dead Lord who didn't stay dead: a crucified Lord who lives among us. And that cannot be explained: only proclaimed and shared and celebrated.

Let's try, again, to get a feel for what happened. We have two historic realities to deal with, both of which - by the way - are at the perimeters of the Resurrection event rather than at its center. The first fact is that one Jesus of Nazareth, known by some as the Christ, was crucified. The Gospel accounts are clear that he was dead, and even the most suspicious historian has real difficulty arguing otherwise. That is the first historic reality: he was dead.

The second is that his friends, then a whole community of people, became

convinced that he did not stay dead. That is a reality. The early Christians experienced something which they identified as the presence of Jesus Christ.

Somewhere between these two identifiable realities something fantastic happened. No one was there to see it. Each of the four Gospels tells it - each a little differently; and each studiously avoids the kind of play-by-play account that we might find satisfying. In fact, there is a considerable discrepancy between the accounts regarding the exact sequence of events. And that alone ought to mean that the Gospel chroniclers did not consult each other in order to present a water-tight case; but instead tried simply to proclaim an event and describe an experience that would challenge the literary skill of the most lucid of writers.

As we attempt to get the feel of the event, it is apparent that nobody really expected it to happen, unless it was that pathetic group of frightened old men who asked Pilate to beef-up the guard at the tomb. They were afraid that his friends might steal the body and then claim a resurrection: at least that's what they told Pilate. But they were wise men, and they know that religious hoaxes are notoriously short-lived, and one wonders if they weren't really afraid that he would rise up and walk again.

In any case, they were the only ones whose behavior even hints at anticipation. The disciples certainly didn't expect it. They had withdrawn with all due haste, hope shattered, ambitions quashed. It had only been a dream: there was nothing to do now but lie low for a few days and then quietly make their way back to Galilie.

Joseph of Arimethea didn't aexpect it: he gave the body a proper burial: the women didn't expect it: they came on the first day of the week to annoint the body and to mourn.

We aren't ever going to know what happened. But I think it is so important to feel that pall of despondency that had fallen over all the principle characters. It is not the stuff out of which an elaborate myth is born. If

If there is anything more incomprehensible to me than the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is the suggestion that this pathetic little group of defeated men assembled in a room and concocted the story and then went out and died for it. We aren't ever going to know: but it is important to feel the way the Resurrection forced its way into their lives: the way they found themselves believing it in spite of themselves. That's important on Easter Sunday, for admittedly we have difficulty believing it; and any man who does not has yet to confront it in all honesty. But they experienced it, and so have countless millions of men and women down through the centuries, and so have we - at times - in fleeting moments of truth when we know it is true. He is alive and in our midst.

To believe that: or better said - to acknowledge the truth of the Easter claim, because I don't think you can will to believe the Resurrection, is to rediscover what we have to dance about and the rationale for continuing the fight.

Let's begin with the second of those propositions Chesterton suggested that a Christian who believes will fight out of the sheer sense of victory. What victory? What fight? To what is he pointing us?

The cross on which Jesus Christ died is, in one sense, a symbol of the power of evil. It is, in one sense, a reminder that things happen in life that are uncategorically bad. Jesus was put to death as a result of a coalition of selfish interests, the desire for political power, and misguided religious orthodoxy. And that kind of thing has continued to happen in the history of humanity and even in our own day. In the crucifixion of Jesus Christ the power of evil was documented and held up for all men to see, and it is foolish, in the shadow of that cross, to hide behind some naive proposition that men are really good at heart and that evil is just the absence of good, and that if we all try harder and get more education and pass better laws, all the evils of our common life will disappear.

The cross says clearly that evil is a force to be reckoned with, and that man must take seriously the power of evil in every day of the common life. The cross, becomes for us, the symbol of the struggle between the force of good and the forces of evil. And if the cross is the end of the story that is bad news indeed.

It would mean, for instance, that the forces of good are really no match for the forces of evil. It would mean, for instance, that love is no match for hatred: that the ultimate realities to which we are bound as human beings are injustice and war and dishonesty and cruelty. It would mean that Jesus is a dead hero, one more noble martyr who tried, but was humiliated in his trying. It would mean that the cross is the symbol of the futility of hope; that the best and noblest efforts of men are ultimately seen to be wasted.

For many today, that is precisely how the world looks. Things are so bad there seems to be no sense in continuing the struggle. That's one of the messages eminating from youth culture. It no longer makes sense to give oneself to noble ideals: it no longer makes sense to try to change the system from the inside - the forces of evil and injustice are simply too strong. And the result is a dangerous cynicism: a philosophy of life that sounds like Mephistopheles' observation to Faust: "The ultimate value of everything is nothing"; and finally the great cop-out: the total withdrawal from the struggle to pursue one's own pleasures, which is disguised as "doing one's own thing."

I could agree with all of that except for one thing. The cross is not the end of the story. Evil and death did not win the struggle. The Resurrection is a stamp approved on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. It says that love - not hate, is powerful; that compassion, not cruelty, is real; that sacrifice and self-giving, not self-gratification, is ultimate.

That needs saying today. Frederick Buechner has observed that: "Anxiety and fear are what we know best in this fantastic century of ours. Wars and rumors of wars. From civilization itself to what seemed the most unalterable

values of the past, everything is threatened or already in ruins. We have heard so much tragic news that when the news is good we cannot hear it." [p. 81 The Magnificent Defeat]

At some point every one of us, young and old, must ask a very important question. Does good have a gambler's chance? Are ideas like peace and brotherhood and justice and freedom utopian illusions - bound to be smothered by the harsh realities of life? Or are these real? Upon the answer to that question depends your willingness to join the fight, or your surrender, your giving up.

Well, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ means that the fight is worth it: that the decisive victory has been won: that good will prevail. To be a Christian; to live out of the glad proclaimation of Easter morning is to fight out of the sheer sense of victory.

It is also, you will remember, to dance out of the sheer sense of joy. But joy is a very illusive and rare feeling. To be sure every man experiences a degree of happiness: good things do occur which call forth good feelings. But joy means something deeper; joy indicates a state of being that fills us and overflows into all our relationships: joy means a basic life style that can be characterized by the word "dancing". It is a phenomenon which the claim of Easter can bring to your life and mine.

And yet, for many of us, it doesn't work out that way. We are filled - deep down inside - with what the philosopher Kirkegaard called "fear and trembling"; and the theologians call "the sense of non-being"; and the psychologists call "basic anxiety" and Lucy, everyone's favorite five cent psychiatrist calls "angst". However you want to embellish it academically what it is - is fear of death; the knowledge that someday I will die, and shortly thereafter any memory of me will die. That haunting, relentless fear has plagued man since he thought his first rational thought.

Listen to the words of the late Paul Tillich: "The face of everyman

shows the trace of the presence of death in his life, of his fear of death, of his resignation to death. This frightful presence of death subjects man to bondage and servitude all of his life." [The Shaking of the Foundations]

Listen to the words of John Donne, writing about the old English custom of ringing the church bell when someone dies: "No man is an island entire of istelf; everyman is a piece of a continent, a part of the main. . . Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never seem to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee!"

And the poetry of Gerald Manley Hopkins:

"Margaret, are you grieving
Over golden grave unlearning? . . .
It is the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for."

That's very real and very personal, and as long as we are caught in that obsessive fear, and that relentless mourning over our own eventual death, our lives will be pretty grim. There will be no deep joy. Even our efforts to overcome our own fears will be tainted, and nothing, no poetry, no soft images, nothing will banish it. Edna St. Vincent Milay said it well, writing about death; "I dc not approve"; and she was eleoquently echoed by Dylan Thomas:

"Do not go gently into the night.
Rage, rage against the dimming of the light."

Well, against that strong, dark theme of dread, there is playing today a beautiful counterpuntal melody. St. Paul said it well, in fact almost playfully, "O Death, where is thy sting? O Grave, where is thy victory" and in his letter to the Romans: "Now I am sure that neither life nor death - nothing in all of creation can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

In counterpoint to our fear the Easter message is this: in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ death was stripped of its power: there is no need to be afraid:

we are free in life to be joyful, to give ourselves wholeheartedly to the tasks of living, holding nothing back. For in the end it is not death, but God.

Who doesn't need to know that? It is risky business to deal sermonically with eternal life. But we are compelled on this day, as the reality of the Resurrection bursts in upon us, to affirm it: to rejoice in it: to celebrate it. Because Jesus Christ is not dead but alive - we are safe.

A real Christian who believes will do two things: dance out of the sheer sense of joy and fight out of the sheer sense of victory. May I simply extend my wish that it be so for you. May this unexplainable miracle: this news so good our minds don't want to believe it, lift you up this day, give you courage tomorrow, open you to the goodness of the life God gives, and grant your peace.

Amen.

Eternal God our father, we are grateful for this day, and for the freedom to live without fear that it brings. We give thanks for Jesus Christ our Lord, who held back nothing in life, and who in his resurrection, shares with us his victory over death. Grant us to hear, afresh, the good news: and grant us to live out of our faith in a Lord who was dead but is alive, now and forever.

Amen.